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ABSTRACT

This report examines how Minnesota school districts use regional education organizations and how well the existing system of regional organizations serves school districts. Data were obtained from a survey of all 395 Minnesota school districts, of which 321, or a response rate of 81 percent, responded. The survey focused on issues surrounding school district membership in an education district or in one or more of three types of cooperative organizations: special education, secondary vocational, and telecommunications cooperatives. Findings indicate that: (1) there are a variety of regional education organizations available to Minnesota school districts; (2) there is extensive school district involvement in regional education organizations; (3) districts join primarily to obtain additional programs and services; (4) districts receive a wide variety of programs and services from regional education organizations; (5) districts are generally satisfied with their regional education organizations; (6) districts find advantages and disadvantages in belonging to more than one organization; and (7) most of those districts that choose not to join do so primarily because of their negative perceptions of structure, operation, and the requirement for local levy. Desirable qualities of a regional education organization include stability, accessibility, and local ownership. Eleven figures and four tables are included. The appendix contains the school district survey. (LMI)

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Regional Education Organizations: The School District Perspective

A Research Report

February 1992

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A Research Report

February 1992

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Summary of Findings

The legislature has grown increasingly concerned with the number of different types of regional education organizations available to school districts in Minnesota. Since the state has played only a limited role in directing the development of an integrated regional service delivery system, the system that exists statewide is very much a patchwork. The two primary concerns are

- multiple regional organizations create unnecessary duplication of programs and services
- multiple regional organizations create duplicative administrative structures and excessive administrative costs

In both cases, dollars that could provide programs to students and districts may be unnecessarily diverted to administration and duplicative programming.

This report examines how school districts use regional organizations and how well the existing system of regional organizations serves school districts.

We surveyed all school districts in greater Minnesota. 321 of 395 (81%) of the districts responded to the survey. The survey focused on issues surrounding school district membership in an education district or in one or more of three specific types of cooperative organizations: special education, secondary vocational, and telecommunications, or interactive television (ITV) cooperatives. As a matter of convenience, throughout this paper we referred to education districts and those three types of cooperatives as "regional organizations."

Many school districts participate in regional education organizations

There is extensive school district involvement in regional education organizations in greater Minnesota. 295 of the 321 districts surveyed belong to at least one of the four regional organizations. Over half of the school districts surveyed (53%) belong to more than one regional organization. Most of the districts that belong to only one regional organization belong to an education district. This may be because many education districts have become umbrella organizations for cooperatives that previously operated independently. (pages 8-9)

Only 8% of the districts surveyed (26 districts) did not belong to any of the four regional organizations. Most of those districts chose not to join education districts primarily because of their perceptions of the way education districts are structured and operated and because of the requirement for local levy. Others did not join because they felt that education districts were not a good option for them. Many school districts that dropped out of regional organizations did so because of decreased state funding or because they didn't believe membership was worth the cost. (pages 29-31)

Districts that belong to regional organizations have a smaller average student population than those that don't. Districts that belong to regional organizations have an average student population of around 1,000 WADM, while those that don't belong have an average population of over 2,500 WADM. (page 8)

School districts join regional education organizations primarily to obtain additional programs and services. Most school districts joined education districts or cooperatives to obtain specific programs and services. However, some districts reported that they joined an education district primarily for additional revenue. Most (98%) of the districts that joined a regional organization for specific programs and services receive those programs and services from the organization. (pages 10-11)

School districts receive a variety of programs and services from regional education organizations. Direct programs for students are what most districts want from regional organizations. A regional organization is a good forum to provide districts with programs required by few students, such as special education, and programs that do not involve students, such as staff development. (pages 12-15)

School districts are generally satisfied with their regional education organizations

Most districts are satisfied with the structure of their education district (75%) and cooperatives (80%). School districts are most often satisfied with their regional organization when they participated in its formation and have a say in its operation. In line with this, school districts want to be included in the process of developing any new organizations or re-organization. (pages 17-18)

Most education district members (85%) are satisfied with the amount of influence they have on how the education district spends its money. School districts are satisfied primarily because they are represented on the education district board and have equal votes with other members. The primary reasons for school district dissatisfaction with influence on spending also relate to education district structure and operation. (pages 19-20)

School districts like the education district five-year planning process. School districts were involved in developing and revising their education districts' five-year plan, and feel that this planning process served them well. (pages 21-22)

Some school districts suggested modifying the current system; others suggested completely restructuring it. The most commonly suggested modifications for both education districts and cooperatives was that they reduce costs and administrative activities. The most commonly suggested way of restructuring both cooperatives and education districts was to combine more organizations. However, school districts are apprehensive of changes which may result in the loss of the positive aspects of the current system of regional organizations. (pages 23-24)

School districts find advantages and disadvantages in belonging to more than one regional education

Over half the school districts surveyed (52%) belong to more than one regional organization. The ability to pick and choose programs from different cooperatives was the primary advantage of membership in multiple regional organization. The most frequently cited disadvantages stemmed from the day-to-day operational implications of belonging to more than one organization, particularly having to attend too many meetings. School districts were also concerned about costs associated with what they perceived as unnecessary duplication of administrative structures. (pages 25-28)

School districts want regional education organizations to have certain characteristics

- **Stability.** School districts indicated that it's difficult for any system to work properly when it is subject to frequent changes and has an uncertain future.
- **Geographic accessibility.** School districts feel that a regional organization that provides direct services to students must be accessible in order to succeed.
- **Non-duplicated programs and services.** School districts would prefer that regional organizations not offer programs and services available elsewhere.
- **A precise fit to district needs.** School districts resist funding regional organizations that provide programs and services that they do not need, and also resist subsidizing other members of a regional organization.
- **Minimal administrative cost and structure.** School districts want regional organizations to provide them with programs and services. The duplicative administrative structures that often accompany multiple regional organizations are perceived as a waste of limited funds.
- **Ownership by the member districts.** Many districts were satisfied with their regional organizations because they had been involved in establishing the organization, had representation on the board, and were involved in deciding which programs should be offered and how funds should be spent.

(pages 35-36)

Overview

The legislature is concerned with the existing system of regional education organizations in Minnesota

The legislature has grown increasingly concerned with the number of different types of regional education organizations available to school districts in Minnesota. The two primary concerns

- multiple regional organizations create unnecessary duplication of programs and services
- multiple regional organizations create duplicative administrative structures and excessive administrative costs

In both cases, dollars intended to provide programs to students and school districts may be unnecessarily diverted to administration and duplicative programming.

The 1991 Legislature, in an effort to address these concerns, enacted two laws that will directly affect regional organizations in the immediate future.

1. Beginning in fiscal year 1994, many of the existing regional organizations are to be financially restructured. Instead of funding flowing to regional organizations, as is currently the case, funding will go directly to school districts. School districts may then purchase services from regional organizations or use the funding to provide programs and services in other ways.

2. The PreK-12 Community Service and Education Service Delivery legislation specifies that all existing regional organizations must be replaced by a single regional delivery system by 1995.

Both of these laws address the legislature's concern that some funding for regional organizations is lost to duplication of services and excess administration.

This report examines how school districts in greater Minnesota use certain types of regional organizations and how well the existing system of regional organizations serves school districts.

There are a variety of regional education organizations available to Minnesota school districts

Regional organizations available to Minnesota school districts include

- education districts
- education cooperative service units (ECSUs)
- regional management information centers (RMICs)
- intermediate districts
- special education cooperatives
- secondary vocational cooperatives
- telecommunications (ITV) cooperatives

School districts may choose to participate in some, all, or none of these cooperative organizations.[1] The strength and availability of these organizations varies throughout the state. For example, where a strong ECSU provides many programs, there may be fewer cooperatives. Where there is a well-developed set of cooperatives available, schools may not have formed an education district. Since the state has played only a limited role in directing the development of an integrated regional service delivery system, the system that exists statewide is very much a patchwork. Following are brief descriptions of the regional organizations available to school districts. We will examine four of these organizations in this report.

Education districts are voluntary regional organizations of school districts designed to increase student opportunity through interdistrict cooperation. An education district must contain at least four school districts, and member districts must be contiguous. The education district receives $50 per pupil in a combination of state aid and local levy.[2] The education district board determines how to spend this revenue. Education districts may spend their revenue in many different areas including staff development, outcome-based education, special education, secondary vocational education, low incidence academics, and program coordination.

Education cooperative service units (ECSUs) are regional organizations of school districts designed to provide planning and educational programs to member districts. There are nine ECSUs, generally corresponding to economic development regions in the state. Each school district in the state belongs to the ECSU for its region. Districts participate in ECSU programs on a voluntary basis.

Regional management information centers (RMICs) are regional organizations that provide computer services to school districts. RMICs assist school districts in providing district level data to the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE). Most districts are required to report data to MDE through RMIC. Each RMIC receives an annual subsidy grant from the state. RMICs may also charge fees for both services and a proportionate share of the capital debt incurred by the RMIC.

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[1] A detailed description of these different cooperatives can be found in the House Research information brief, **School District Cooperation and Consolidation: A Summary of Existing Law**, revised 1992.

[2] In 1990-91, education districts received $60 per pupil.

Intermediate districts are organizations for school districts primarily within the seven county metropolitan area.[3] They were designed to provide cooperative technical college, secondary vocational, and special education programs. All metropolitan districts except Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Anoka belong to one of three intermediate districts. Those three large school districts are excluded by law from intermediate district membership.

Special education cooperatives are formed by school districts to provide special education in one of two ways: (1) using a joint powers agreement; or (2) designating one district to serve as a host district. These cooperatives fund their programs with state and federal funds for special education teachers and with fees from member districts.

Secondary vocational cooperatives are organizations of two or more school districts that provide cooperative secondary vocational education. Each cooperative's board assesses each member district a proportionate share of the cost. These cooperatives may levy $20 per pupil.

Telecommunications cooperatives are formed by school districts using a joint powers agreement to offer interactive television (ITV) programming for students. Programs offered often include low incidence courses and programming for gifted and talented students. Many of these cooperatives were originally funded by grants. In 1991, school districts were authorized to levy up to 0.5% of adjusted net tax capacity for ITV costs.

School districts in greater Minnesota provided information on their perceptions of regional education organizations

We surveyed all school districts in greater Minnesota. 321 of 395 (81%) of the districts responded to the survey. We focused on issues surrounding school district membership in an education district or in one or more of three specific types of cooperative organizations: special education, secondary vocational, and telecommunications (ITV) cooperatives. Membership in each of these organizations is strictly voluntary, and the organizations are focused, to a large degree, on direct services to students. These organizations tend to be small while ECSUs and RMICs tend to be large. For example, in 1990-91, education districts had, on average, eight member districts while ECSU membership ranged from 26 to 89 school districts.

As a matter of convenience, throughout this paper we will refer to education districts and the three types of cooperatives as "regional organizations." We will not use the term "regional organization" to refer to ECSUs or RMICs. We also surveyed school districts that belonged to neither an education district nor any of the three specified cooperative types, to determine if they did not belong by choice or faced obstacles to joining regional organizations.

We did not survey metropolitan districts that belong to one of the three intermediate school districts or the Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Anoka school districts. We excluded metropolitan area districts because most of them are large enough to provide a wide range of programs for students within the district, minimizing some of the need for cooperative involvement. Most metropolitan districts may obtain special education and other low incidence services through an intermediate district. The environment surrounding metropolitan schools differs somewhat from that which exists in greater Minnesota, where districts pick and choose services from a number of different regional organizations.

[3]Some school districts slightly outside the seven county metro area, such as Goodhue, also belong to one of the three intermediate districts.

District superintendents received surveys tailored to their 1990-91 regional organization membership: none, an education district only, one or more cooperative organizations only, or an education district and one or more cooperatives (see appendix A for a copy of the survey instrument). The surveys focused on three areas

- school districts' reasons for joining or not joining a regional organization
- satisfaction with various aspects of the regional organizations that districts belonged to in 1990-91
- the types of programs school districts received from the different regional organizations

In the survey superintendents were asked to explain their responses and offer general commentary. Selected comments from superintendents appear in italicized quotes throughout the report.

School District Involvement in Regional Education Organizations

There is extensive school district involvement in regional education organizations

Most of the school districts in greater Minnesota belong to a special education cooperative or an education district. Table 1 shows how many of the districts surveyed belong to the different regional organizations.

Table 1
School District Involvement in Regional Organizations in Greater Minnesota*

	Special Education Cooperatives	Secondary Vocational Cooperatives	ITV Cooperatives	Education District	None
Number of Member Districts	197	77	81	206	26
Average district size in FY 1991 WADM	806	1,174	869	1,114	2,525
Total WADM (% of state)	158,688 (19%)	90,422 (11%)	70,400 (8%)	229,461 (28%)	65,644 (8%)

*This table shows characteristics of the 321 districts that responded to our survey. Weighted Average Daily Membership [WADM] for fiscal year 1991 is a measure of district enrollment where kindergarten students are weighted at 0.5, elementary (grades 1-6) students at 1.0, and secondary students (grades 7-12) at 1.35. The percent of state WADM is based on a total state enrollment of 830,113 WADM for fiscal year 1991.

Very few districts do not belong to a regional organization. Only 26 school districts reported that they do not belong to any of the four regional organizations. These 26 districts contain about 8% of the state's student population.

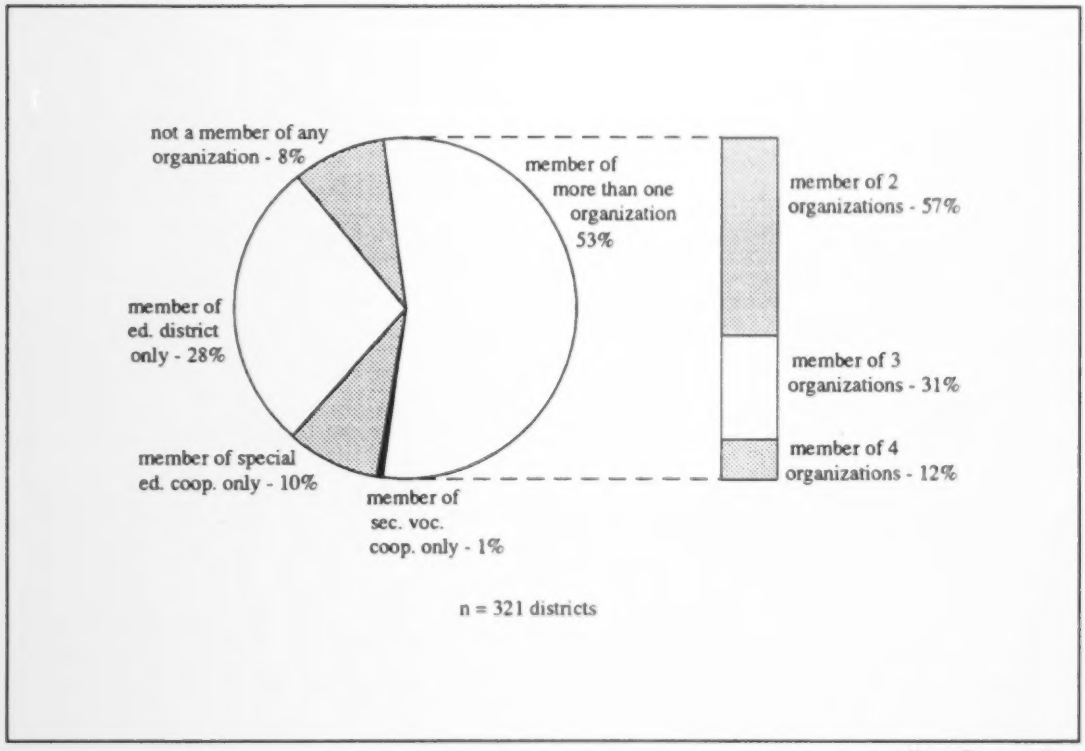
Districts that belong to regional organizations have a smaller average student population than those that do not. Table 1 shows that districts that belong to regional organizations have an average student population of around 1,000 WADM, while those that do not belong have average populations of over 2,500 WADM. These larger, districts may have enough special needs students, whether for special education, secondary vocational, or low incidence academics, to be able to provide most of their own programs in a cost-effective manner. Smaller school districts, in contrast, look to regional organizations for efficient program delivery.

> ***"Cooperatives may be the only way small districts can afford some special education services."***

> ***"Smaller school districts need to cooperate to offer essential services."***

School districts often belong to more than one regional organization. Figure A shows the overlap in membership among regional organizations, with 53% of school districts belonging to more than one regional organization. Most of the school districts that belong to only one regional organization belong to an education district. This is probably because many of the cooperative organizations have moved under the umbrella of an education district.[4] Many school districts still maintain membership in more than one regional organization.

Figure A
School District Membership in Regional Organizations


not a member of any organization - 8%
member of more than one organization 53%
member of ed. district only - 28%
member of special ed. coop. only - 10%
member of sec. voc. coop. only - 1%
member of 2 organizations - 57%
member of 3 organizations - 31%
member of 4 organizations - 12%
n = 321 districts

House Research Graphics

[4]See the report, **Education Districts**, by Sue Urahn and Nina Manzi, House Research Department, December 1991.

School districts join regional education organizations primarily to obtain additional programs and services

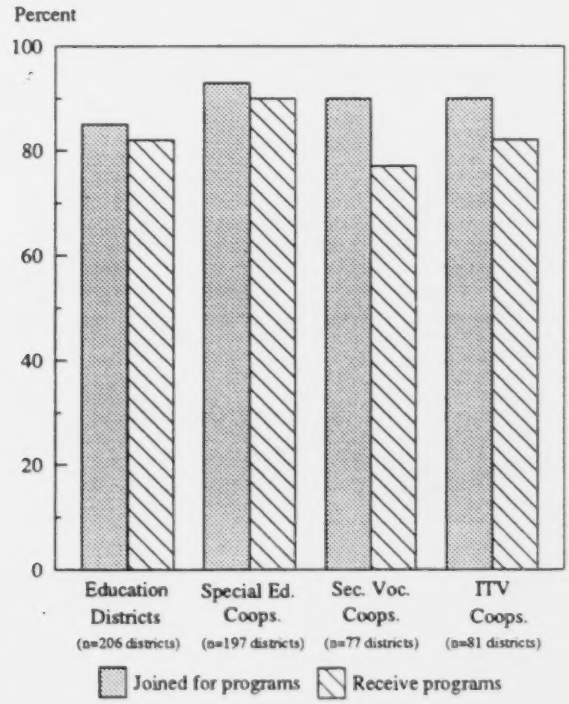
Most school districts joined education districts to obtain specific programs and services. All districts participating in education districts receive programs and services. They also generate $50 per pupil in combined levy and state aid in education district revenue.

The only reason school districts reported for joining special education, secondary vocational, and ITV cooperatives was to meet their needs for specific programs and services.

> ***"Cooperatives were formed for specific reasons by school districts and serve districts that need the specific services. Education districts were created by the legislature and schools joined them for the money and then tried to find services that could be delivered to justify the money."***

Figure B shows that of the 206 education district members surveyed, 174 (84%) reported that they joined because they needed specific programs and services. It also shows that about 90% of all cooperative members joined to obtain specific programs and services.

Figure B
School Districts that Joined Regional Organizations to Receive Programs and The Extent to which They Receive Them



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Most of the school districts that joined a regional organization for specific programs and services receive those programs and services. Figure B shows that almost all (170) of the school districts that wanted specific programs or services from education districts receive the programs and services they wanted. Similarly high numbers of school districts that wanted specific programs from their special education cooperative, secondary vocational cooperative, and ITV cooperative receive those programs.

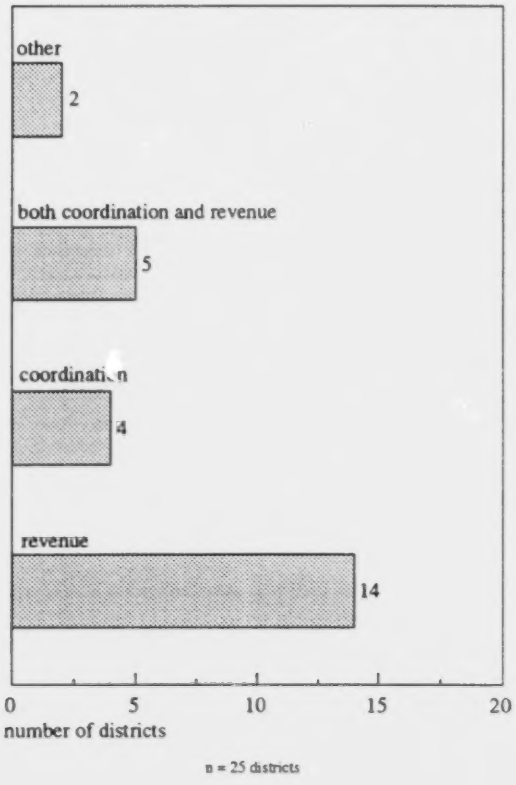
Some school districts joined an education district for reasons other than obtaining specific programs and services. Figure C shows that the other primary reasons given for joining an education district included:

- to obtain more revenue; and
- to improve general coordination and cooperation with other school districts

"We are a large enough school district that an education district is only important to us to gain access to additional revenue."

"Let's be honest -- joining an education district put us on the same footing as intermediates. The extra bucks really helped."

Figure C
Other Reasons for Joining an Education District



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Regional Education Organization Programs and Services

School Districts receive a variety of programs and services from regional education organizations

We grouped the types of programs and services offered by regional organizations into five categories in order to facilitate analysis: administration, capital, coordination, development, and direct programs for students.

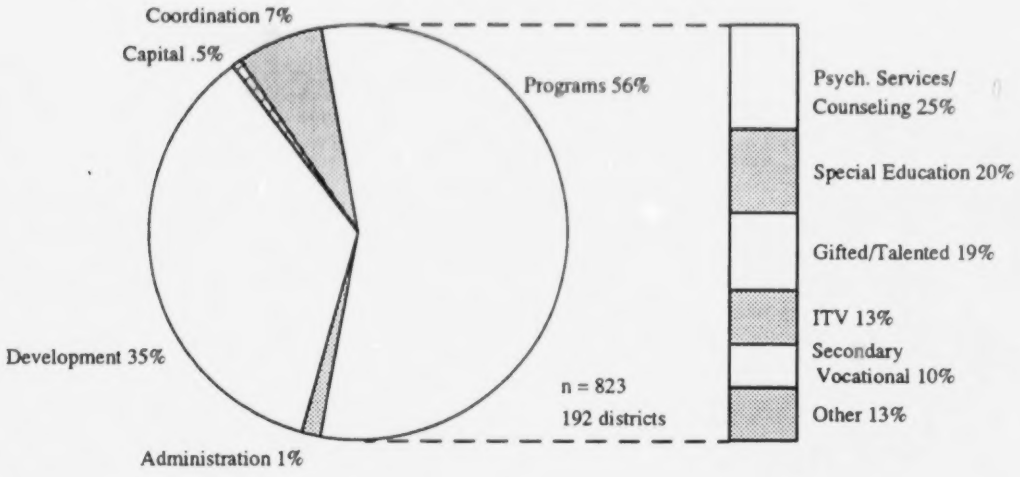
- **Administration** includes administration of the regional organization and various administrative services, such as financial management or the tracking of compliance with state laws and mandates.
- **Capital** includes the rental, acquisition, and maintenance of equipment and buildings.
- **Coordination** includes cooperative purchasing, efforts to share staff and students, and coordination of member district efforts in various programs areas.
- **Development** includes curriculum development, staff development, and outcome based education training, planning, and development of outcomes.
- **Direct programs for students** include psychological services and counseling, special education staff and programs, secondary vocational classes, gifted and talented programming, and ITV classes, which are often foreign languages.

School districts belong to regional organizations primarily to obtain direct programs for students. Figure D shows that when school districts listed the five most important things that regional organizations do for them, direct programs for students comprised 66% of the responses from cooperative members and 56% of the responses from education district members.[5]

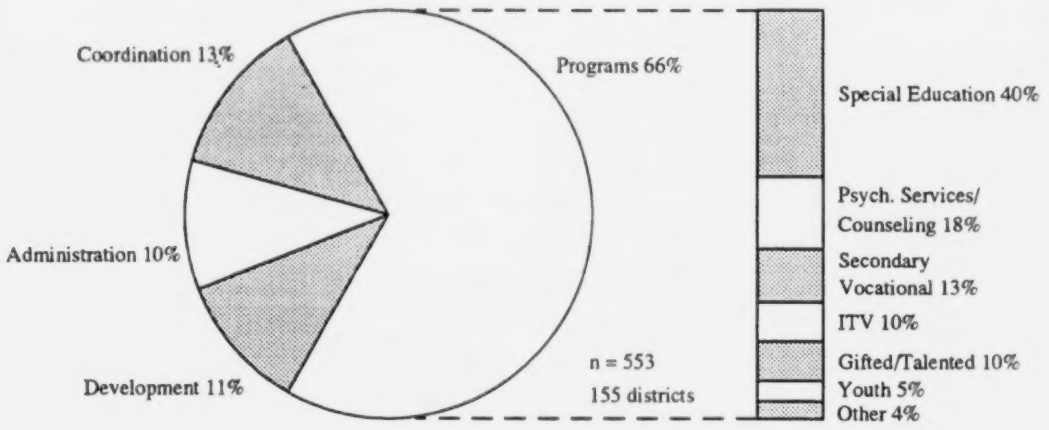
[5] We asked school districts belonging to an education district to list up to five important education district programs or services; school districts belonging to cooperatives to list up to five important cooperative programs or services; and districts belonging to both types of organization to list up to five programs or services for each.

Figure D
Most Important Programs and Services School Districts Receive from Regional Organizations

From Education Districts



From Cooperatives



House Research Graphics

Figure D shows that psychological services and counseling and special education headed the list of important programs for both education district and cooperative members. Cooperative members listed administrative services as important more often than education district members did. Special education cooperative tracking of compliance with laws and mandates was the most frequently listed administrative service. Education district members were more likely to list development-related activities (e.g. staff and curriculum development) among their five most important programs and services than were cooperative members (35% from education districts compared to 11% from cooperatives). This may be because cooperatives focus primarily on providing direct programs for students, while education districts' mandate directs them to provide a broader range of services.

> ***Our education district is the successor to a prior special education cooperative of the same member schools and has been an extremely valuable organization. The prior cooperative was also very effective but we see the education district as equally effective but having a wider range of services."***

Regional organizations provide programs that lend themselves well to cooperative efforts. Such programs include low incidence programs which many school districts cannot economically provide within the district, and programs that don't involve students at all. The types of programs that school districts need, as indicated in Figure D, lend themselves to cooperative efforts. Programs such as special education, secondary vocational courses, or foreign languages, like most courses, can be offered more economically if a "critical mass" of students is present. However, many districts have relatively few students who want or need these programs. Other programs, such as curriculum development and staff development, don't require the presence of students at all, which makes them relatively easy to coordinate among districts. Many districts look to regional organizations for these types of programs.

School districts have relatively few students participating in special education or secondary vocational programs. These programs are prime candidates for cooperative efforts. Almost all the school districts surveyed reported some students participating in special education or secondary vocational programs. Table 2 shows that on average, school districts have about 100 students participating in special education and about the same number participating in secondary vocational programs. However, this represents, on average, only about 10% of all the students in those districts. While the school district may want, and in the case of special education be required, to provide programs for those students, it is clearly more effective for them to provide such programs cooperatively with other school districts.

> ***"Our special education cooperative is very important to us. Without it none of the districts could afford the services we offer if we had to go it alone."***
>
> ***"We need cooperatives to provide for specialized programs, some of which are mandated."***
>
> ***"Special education and vocational cooperatives have helped our district serve certain unique needs of students."***

The ITV situation differs in that a school district may have many students participating in ITV courses, but only a few participating in any given course. For example, a school district may have 19 students taking French, five taking German, and another 12 taking calculus. While Table 2 shows 19% of students on average in ITV courses, these students are likely to be enrolled in a wide variety of classes.

Table 2
Student Participation in Special Education, Secondary Vocational, and ITV Programs*

	Special Education	Secondary Vocational	ITV
Average number of students in a district that participate	101	110	169
Average percentage of students in a district that participate	12%	9%	19%
Percent of districts that offer program within their district	74%	45%	35%
Percent of districts in which students leave their school to participate	31%	21%	7%

*This table shows characteristics of the 321 districts that responded to our survey.

School districts provide for students in special education, secondary vocational, or ITV by offering some programs within the district and by sending students out for others. Table 2 shows that almost three-quarters of the school districts operate some special education programs in the district, while about one-half the school districts provide secondary vocational programs and one-third provide ITV programs. Almost one-third of the school districts have some students who leave their schools for special education programs. Students in 21% of the districts leave their schools for secondary vocational programs, and students in 7% of the districts leave for ITV programs.[6]

Many of the programs school districts obtain from regional organizations, such as curriculum development, staff development, and tracking of laws and mandates, do not require staff/student interaction. Many school districts (68%) cooperate with other school districts or regional organizations in curriculum development.[7] This includes 61% of school districts that belong to neither a cooperative nor an education district, indicating that cooperative curriculum development does happen independently of regional organization membership. Of school districts that do belong to education districts, 65% received funding and support for curriculum development from the education district. Seventy-five school districts gave the need for curriculum development as a reason for joining an education district, and 106 listed it as one of the five most important programs or services received from an education district. Fifty school districts gave staff development as a reason for joining an education district and 83 listed it as one of the five most important programs received.

> ***"Staff development and curriculum planning have been very successful areas of [education district] endeavor."***

[6]Students may leave their home school to participate in ITV programs when not all school buildings in the district are connected to the ITV system.

[7]We asked this survey question of school districts belonging only to education districts, to both education districts and cooperatives, and to neither education districts nor cooperatives. This question was inadvertently not included in the survey of school districts belonging only to cooperatives.

School District Satisfaction with Regional Education Organizations

School districts are very satisfied with their regional education organizations

Most school districts are satisfied with the structure of their education district and cooperatives. Education districts have a legislatively defined structure, with each district run by an education district board. All member districts have equal representation and voting rights on that board, which gives them the opportunity to influence education district spending. Further, all school districts had the opportunity to participate in the development of their education district's five year plan, which outlines budget and program priorities. Education districts are funded with a combination of aid and levy equal to $50 per pupil. The total levy for the education district is calculated on the tax capacity of the entire education district. Each member district is then required to levy its proportionate share, based on the member district's tax capacity. Under this system, member districts with more property wealth contributes more to the education district revenue.[8]

Cooperatives, in contrast, have a less clearly defined structure. Many cooperatives are created using joint powers agreements.[9] When a joint powers agreement is implemented, the group of school districts involved is not required to have a joint board. However, if a joint board is established, each school district involved in the joint powers agreement must be represented on the board. Funding for cooperatives varies. Special education cooperatives receive federal and state reimbursement for some of the special education costs. Unreimbursed costs are billed back to the student's district of residence. Secondary vocational cooperatives may receive aid for teachers salaries. They also receive a combination of aid and levy of $20 per pupil. The levy is computed the same way that education district levy is computed. Districts may not levy for both education revenue and secondary vocational revenue. Many ITV cooperatives were orginally funded by grants. In 1991, school districts were authorized to levy up to 0.5% of adjusted net tax capacity for ITV costs.

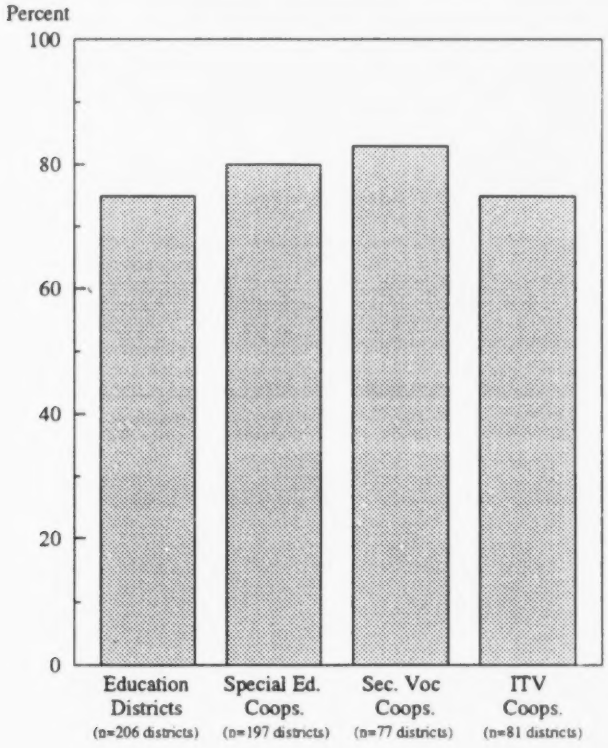
[8]Under this system, it is possible for a member district of an education district to contribute more than $50 per pupil in levy to the education district.

[9]A joint powers agreement allows school districts to join together to cooperatively provide any service that an individual school district is authorized to provide.

Figure E shows school district satisfaction with regional organization structure. Seventy-five percent of districts feel satisfied with education district structure, while about 80% find cooperative structure satisfactory.

"Service delivery for our school is generally excellent from the education district [and] special education cooperative."

Figure E
School District Satisfaction with Regional Organization Structure



House Research Graphics

Most education district members (85%) are satisfied with the amount of influence they have on how the education district spends its money (see Figure F). Member districts derive satisfaction primarily from the way the education district is structured and operated. Figure F shows that the primary reasons for satisfaction are that each district is represented on the education district board, and that school districts have equal votes on the board.[10] Additional reasons for satisfaction include good communication within the education district, a well-run education district, local control of education district revenue, and that the districts in the area, perhaps because of common needs, were predisposed to work together in an education district-type organization.

> ***"I feel that the structure of education district lends itself to providing direct services to our member districts while allowing local input into the decision making process."***
>
> ***"The education district is akin to neighbors working together rather than a bureaucracy implementing programs from some distant place."***

The primary reasons for school district dissatisfaction with influence on spending also relate to education district structure and operation. Specific reasons given by 18 school districts included lack of input, a structure that subjects a minority of members to the decisions of the majority, meetings too far away, too many meetings, and excessive administrative structure and cost.[11]

Four school districts feel their education district is poorly run, and another four indicated that cooperation isn't likely given the schools in the area. Seven are dissatisfied with financial management, including budgets that are too vague, programs that are too costly, and a general lack of consensus on spending.

The fact that some school districts are satisfied with the education district structure while others are not may point to factors underlying structure as the cause of dissatisfaction. These factors may relate to the particular composition of specific education districts. For example, schools belonging to education districts with member districts of greatly different sizes may experience tension related to those size differences.[12]

> ***"I always felt that it was interesting that "votes" were always a major issue - larger district, more "votes." Regardless of "votes", it is more important that if you contribute 40% of the revenue to an education district, that you would receive 40% of the service. If you contribute 40% of the revenue and receive only 20% of the service you have a problem in the structure and no number of "votes" will change that problem."***
>
> ***"The structure needs guidance and technical assistance so that larger school districts do not feel they are subsidizing the smaller school districts and the smaller districts can maintain identity if not independence."***

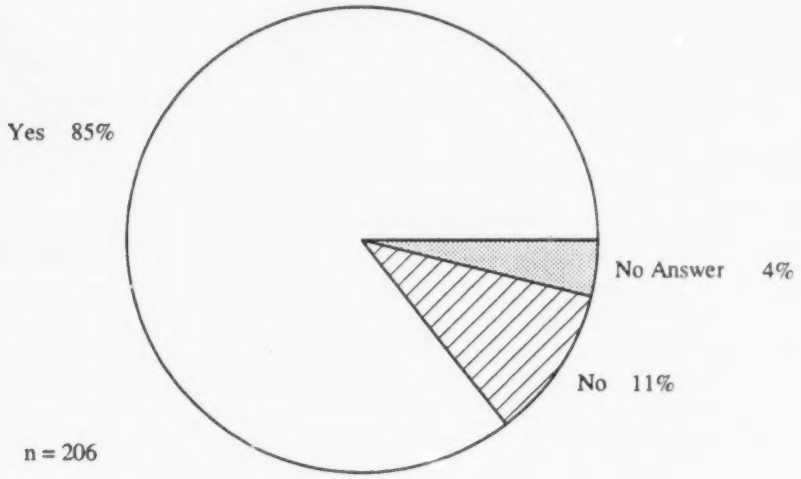
---

[10]Some school districts reported more than one reason for satisfaction with their influence on education district spending.

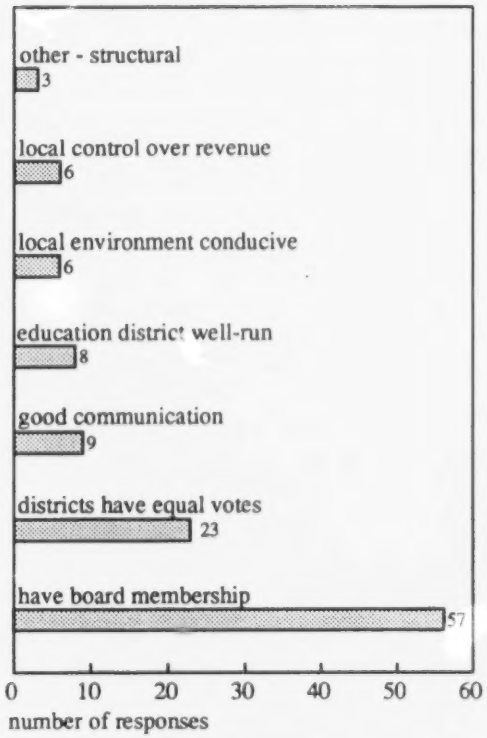
[11]Some school districts reported more than one reason for dissatisfaction with their influence on education district spending.

[12]See the research report **Education Districts**, by Sue Urahn and Nina Manzi, House Research Department, December 1991.

Figure F
Are School Districts Satisfied with Their Ability to Influence Education District Spending?

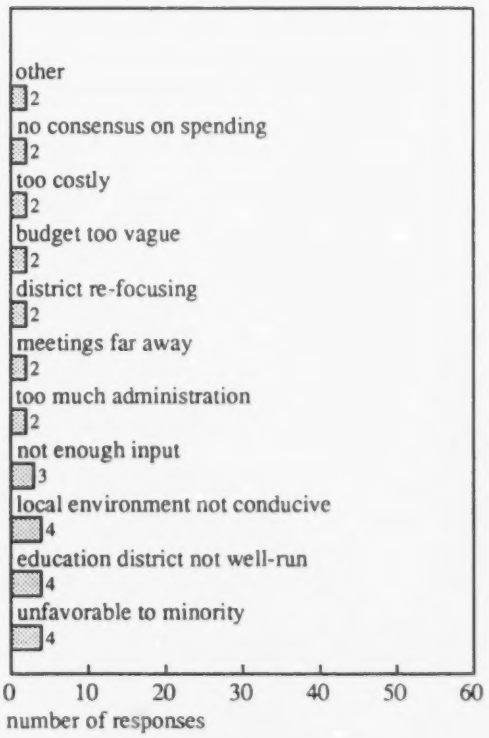


Reasons Satisfied



n = 112 responses
n = 120 districts

Reasons dissatisfied



n = 29 responses
n = 120 districts

House Research Graphics

School districts were involved in developing and revising their education districts' five-year plan, and feel that this planning process served them well. In 1989, the legislature implemented a series of measures designed to increase the fiscal and programmatic accountability of education districts. One of these measures was the requirement that each education district develop a five year plan describing education district programs and budget and submit that plan to the state board of education for approval. Receipt of education district revenue was contingent on state board approval of the plan.

All but eight of the school districts that belong to education districts reported that they had participated in developing the district's five-year plan.[13] Most districts also participated in any revisions to the plan. Figure G shows that 88% of the school districts reported that the plan addresses their needs. Most school districts that told us that the plan addresses their needs think it does so because they have board membership. Having board membership ensures that the districts were involved in forming the plan, have the opportunity to discuss and vote on any proposed changes, and will be involved in its implementation. Other school districts are satisfied with the plan because they get the programs they want.

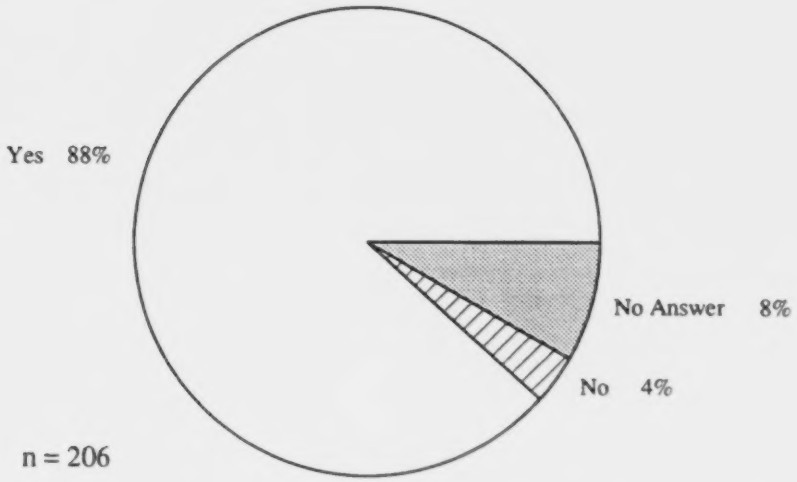
School districts that reported reasons for dissatisfaction with the plan would prefer to have education district revenues flow directly back to school districts, have different needs than other member districts, or feel that legislative changes have prevented operational stability.

> ***"We need more time to work together, but the legislature changes the ballgame every year."***

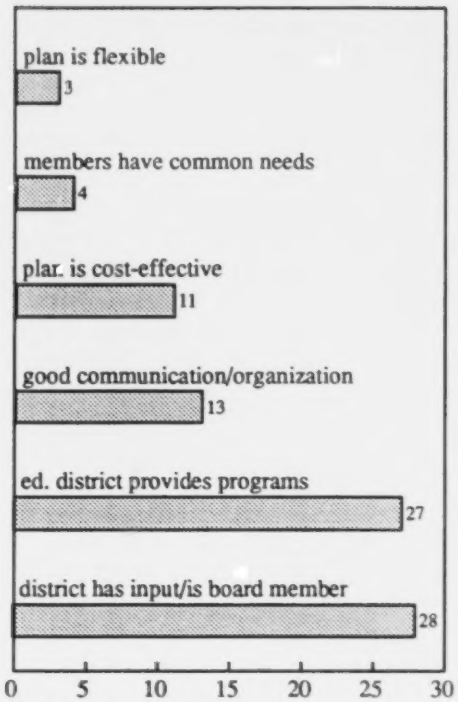
Most of the reasons for dissatisfaction may indicate unhappiness with a planning process that forces districts to compromise when deciding how to spend education district revenue. These dissatisfied school districts may have such different needs from other member districts that the planning process becomes a tug-of-war over the revenue.

[13]These eight districts did not respond to the question concerning satisfaction with the five year plan.

Figure G
Do School Districts Think Five-year Plan Addresses Needs?



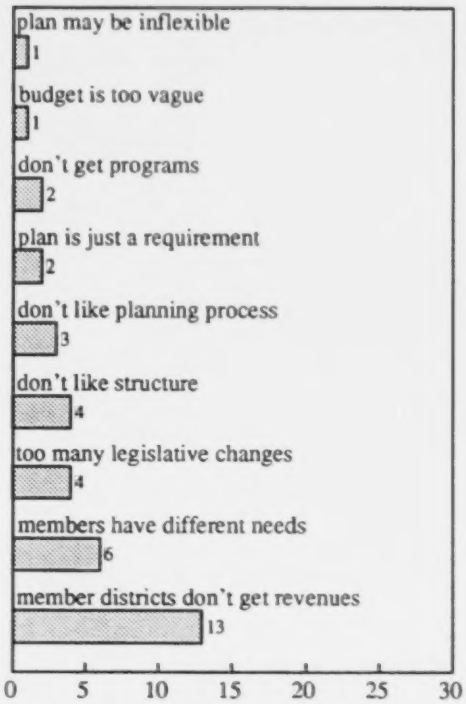
Reasons Satisfied



n = 86 responses

n = 113 districts

Reasons dissatisfied



n = 36 responses

n = 113 districts

House Research Graphics

Several school districts suggested ways of changing the structure of education districts and cooperatives in response to open-ended questions. We classified these as internal changes, relating to how an individual regional organization is structured and operated, and external changes, relating to the role of education districts and cooperatives in the broader array of regional organizations. Table 3 shows the suggested internal changes to regional organizations. Table 4 shows suggested external changes to regional organizations.

Table 3
Suggested Internal Changes to Regional Organizations

Suggested Changes to Education Districts	Suggested Changes to Cooperatives
Reduce costs and administration (7)	Reduce costs and administration (17)
Eliminate duplication of services (4)	Improve curriculum and program availability (6)
Change levy distribution (3)	Increase stability (3)
Increase responsiveness (3)	Increase responsiveness (2)
Decrease restrictions and MDE reporting (3)	Increase funding (2)
	Fix technical problems (ITV) (2)
26 districts suggested changes. Some suggested more than one change. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of districts suggesting that change.	36 districts suggested changes. Some suggested more than one change. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of districts suggesting that change.

The most commonly suggested internal change for both education districts and cooperatives is that they reduce costs and administrative activities (24 districts).

> ***"Whatever you do, please reduce the paperwork."***

Education district members also suggested eliminating the duplication of programs and services (4 districts), changing the levy distribution (3 districts), increasing the education district's responsiveness to members' needs (3 districts), and decreasing the number of restrictions and amount of MDE reporting (3 districts). Suggested changes to cooperatives often related to the cooperatives' responsiveness. Six districts wanted improved curriculum and program availability and two wanted generally increased responsiveness.

Table 4
Suggested External Changes to Regional Organizations

Suggested Changes to Education Districts	Suggested Changes to Cooperatives
Put special education cooperative in the education district (3)	Put all regional organizations in one "umbrella" organization (10)
Make education districts smaller or adopt cluster model (5)	Make the cooperative smaller (3)
Give revenues directly to school districts (3)	Put special education or ITV cooperative in the education district (6)
Make education districts larger (2)	Make the cooperative a joint powers body (4)
15 districts suggested changes. Some suggested more than one change. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of districts suggesting that change.	25 districts suggested changes. Some suggested more than one change. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of districts suggesting that change.

The most commonly suggested external change to both cooperatives and education districts is to combine more organizations. Ten cooperative members suggested putting all regional organizations under one umbrella organization, and an additional six recommended putting a specific cooperative, either special education or ITV, into the education district. Three education district members suggested folding the special education cooperative into the education district.

> ***"The cooperatives our district belongs to are helpful and seem well run. I would question however, the necessity of directors for each cooperative and some of the duplicated services of these cooperatives. Maybe some consolidation of services could be done."***

Some cooperative and education district members (three and five districts respectively) recommended that the organizations be smaller or changed to a cluster model of service delivery.

> ***"I fear if the structure gets too removed from the student (i.e. ECSU size) we will lose input and effective decision implementation."***

School districts find advantages and disadvantages in belonging to more than one regional education organization

Over half the school districts surveyed (53%) belong to more than one regional organization. In an open-ended survey question, we asked school districts to list advantages and disadvantages of multiple membership. Figures H and I show the responses.[14]

The ability to pick and choose programs from different cooperatives was the primary advantage of membership in multiple regional organizations. Many school districts felt that being able to pick and choose enhanced both program quality and cost effectiveness. Figure K shows that most of the advantages of multiple membership relate to how the different organizations are structured and run. Sixty-four school districts said that since each regional organization has a specific role to play, the programs and services offered by the cooperatives are well focused and tailored to member district needs.

> ***"Each arrangement has evolved to meet specific needs with agreeable partners."***

Thirty-three school districts like being able to pick and choose programs from different cooperatives. Fifty districts said that multiple membership enables them to get more and better programs for their students. Forty-one districts found that multiple membership has allowed them to realize cost savings in a variety of areas.

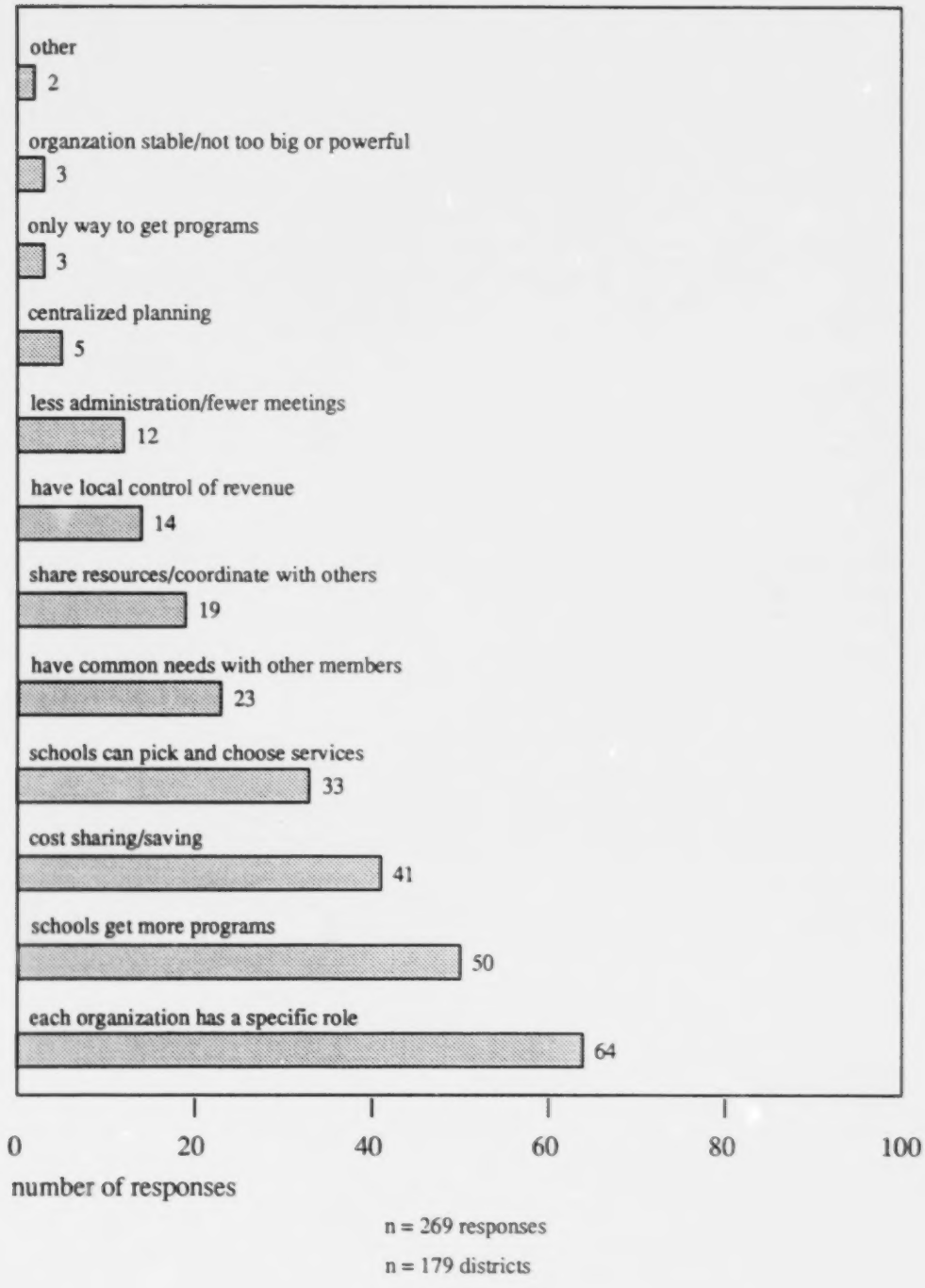
> ***"We purchase TV from the "north", because it is financially advantageous for us due to a lease agreement. We purchase "special education" administration and specialists time from the "south" because their services are good and the costs reasonable. If we were forced to pick between the two, it would mean higher costs!"***

Twenty three school districts said that the voluntary nature of membership ensures that members share needs and that the programs offered by the cooperative will be those needed by the districts. Nineteen school districts found that multiple membership encourages them to share resources, including staff and students, with other districts.

> ***"The good thing about education districts and cooperatives in general, is that it requires people to work together for common goals."***

[14]Some school districts listed more than one advantage or disadvantage, and some listed both advantages and disadvantages.

Figure H
Advantages of Multiple Membership



n = 269 responses

n = 179 districts

House Research Graphics

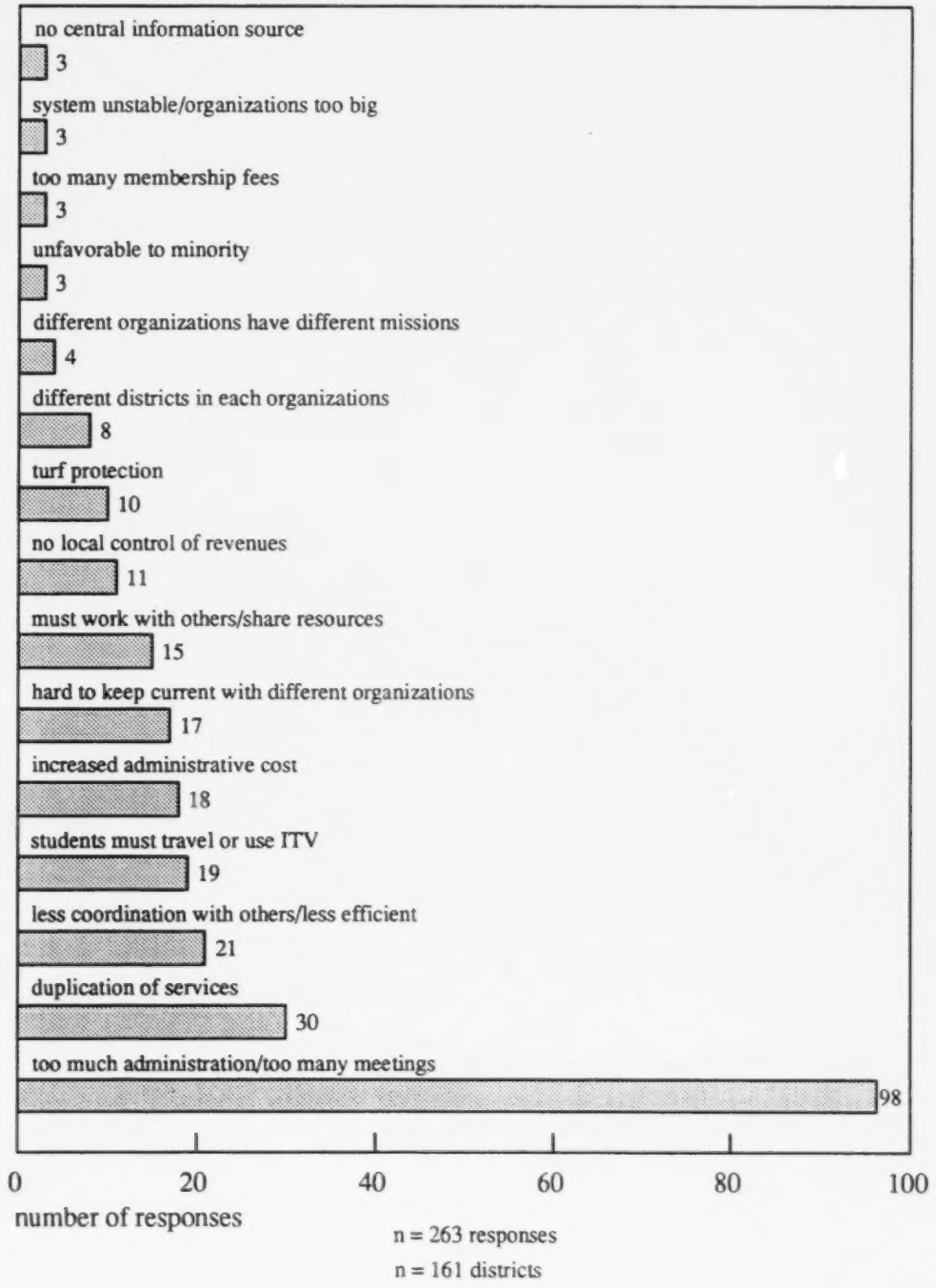
The most frequently cited disadvantages stemmed from the day-to-day operational implications of belonging to more than one organization. School districts cited attendance at too many meetings and excessive administration as disadvantages of multiple membership 98 times. In line with these concerns, eighteen districts think that multiple membership results in increased administrative costs.

> ***"Multiple governing boards seem confusing at times. [It's] hard to get board members integrated in so many cooperatives."***

Thirty districts believe that multiple membership leads to duplication of services. Nineteen districts think students have to travel too much to obtain programs.

> ***"I believe that at the present time there is too much overlapping of services that some of the agencies provide. For instance, ECSUs and education districts provide many of the same services. It seems to me that one agency could do a better job if they could specialize in a number of services, rather than battle with another agency as to who will provide what services to what school district."***

Figure I
Disadvantages of Multiple Membership



House Research Graphics

Some school districts chose not to belong to a regional education organization

Most school districts that do not belong to an education district chose not to join one primarily because of their perceptions of the way education districts are structured and operated and because of the requirement for local levy (see Figure J). Of the school districts surveyed, one hundred fifteen (36%) did not belong to education districts. Twelve of these reported that they are in the process of joining an education district, while others reported discomfort with their perception of the structure and operation of education districts.

Figure J shows that 24 school districts thought that education districts are administratively inefficient, require too much paperwork, and have too many rules, such as the common calendar and joint seniority requirements. Twenty-three school districts didn't join education districts because they saw joining as a loss of local control, while 18 either didn't want to impose the additional levy on taxpayers or thought education districts weren't worth the cost.[15]

> ***"Education districts were created and funded before services were asked for or needed. Most districts joined for the money and got little if any new unduplicated service. We chose to support the existing cooperatives that actually provide our service."***

Other school districts didn't join because they felt that education districts were not a good option for them. Fourteen districts didn't join because they are satisfied with their current method of obtaining programs, whether it is on their own, through cooperatives, or in some other manner. Eleven districts didn't join because they didn't want to become dependent on funding which they saw as having an uncertain future. Ten districts currently cooperate with at least one other district through an interdistrict cooperation agreement and receive $50 per pupil funding through the interdistrict cooperation levy. These districts, by law, cannot receive both the interdistrict cooperation levy and belong to an education district.[16]

> ***"We chose interdistrict cooperation levy rather than education district because there was only $10 difference in per WADM revenue. The administration of an education district cost more than that difference, and there are far fewer restrictions on the interdistrict cooperation monies allowing for more flexibility and much more direct and indirect benefit to students."***[17]

Eight districts either felt they were geographically too far away from their neighbors to reap much benefit from belonging to an education district, or weren't contiguous to any districts belonging to an education district and thus weren't eligible for membership.

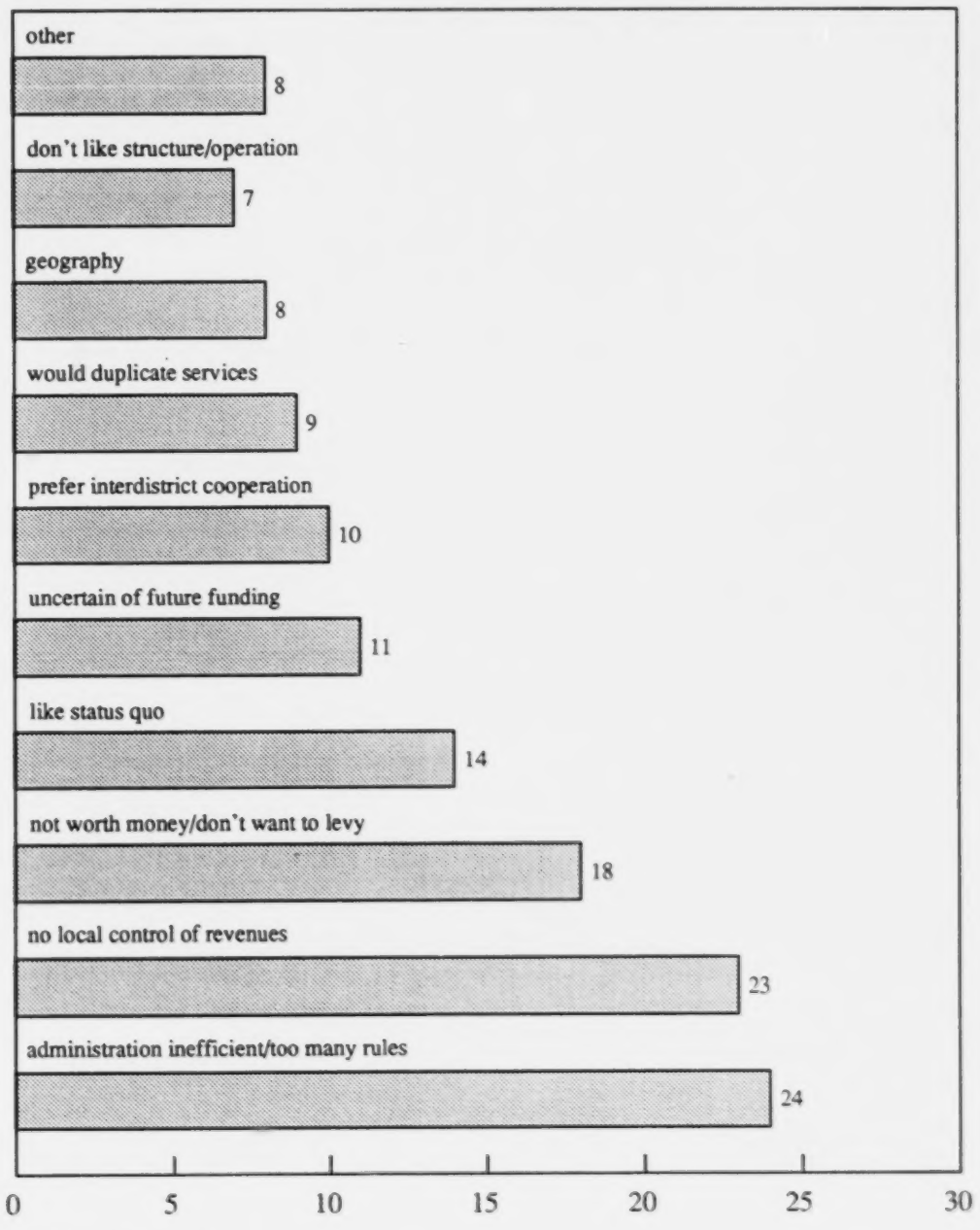
---

[15]Some school districts gave more than one reason for not joining.

[16]State law also specifies that if any school district involved in an interdistrict cooperation agreement (but not levying the interdistrict cooperation levy) belongs to an education district, then all the districts involved in interdistrict cooperation must also belong to that education district. One school district reported that they dropped out of their education district to satisfy this requirement.

[17]In fiscal 1991, the year this survey data is based on, education district funding was $60 per pupil - $10 more than interdistrict cooperation levy.

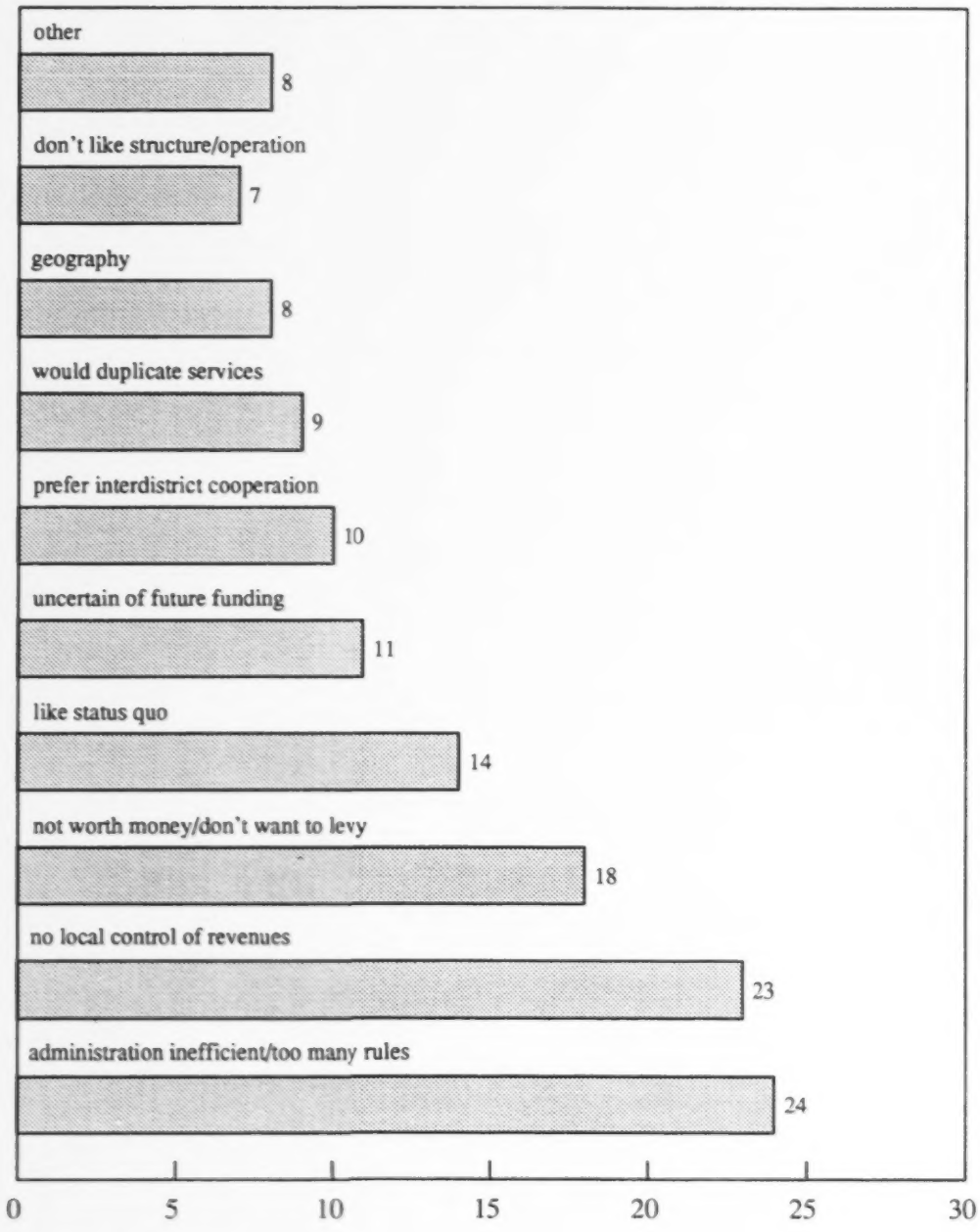
Figure J
Reasons for Not Joining An Education District



n = 132 responses
n = 100 districts

House Research Graphics

Figure J
Reasons for Not Joining an Education District

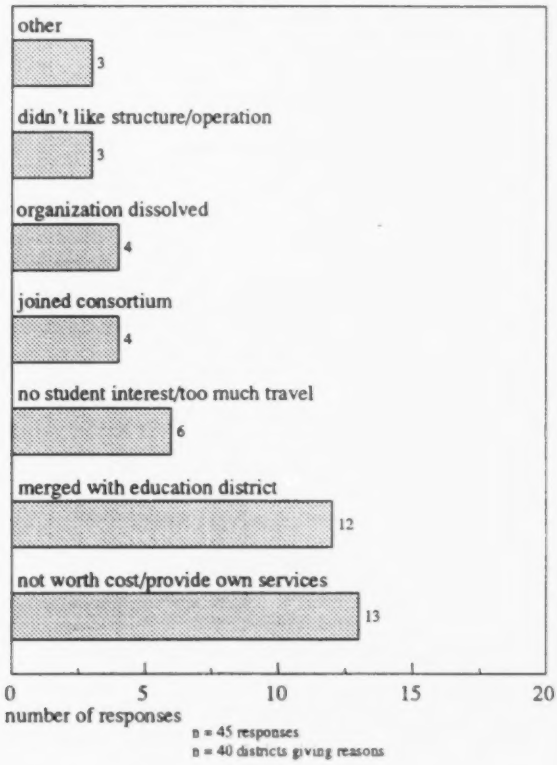


n = 132 responses
n = 100 districts

House Research Graphics

Many school districts that dropped out of regional organizations did so because of decreased state funding or because they didn't believe membership was worth the cost. Districts that left secondary vocational cooperatives said they left because students had to travel too much or were not interested in the courses offered, some of which were outdated. Seventeen school districts left education districts, 25 left special education cooperatives, 29 left secondary vocational cooperatives, and 8 left ITV cooperatives.[18]

Figure K
Reasons School Districts Leave Regional Organizations



House Research Graphics

Most of the school districts that left regional organizations either provide services within their own district or do without. Twelve districts that reported a reason for dropping out of cooperatives indicated that the cooperative had merged with an education district. These school districts continue to receive the same services, but from an organization with a different name.

[18]Some school districts listed more than one reason for dropping out of a regional organization

Additional School District Comments

In the final section of the survey, we gave school districts the opportunity to comment on any aspect of regional organizations. School districts showed a high degree of concern, with 217 of the 321 districts (68%) taking the time to offer comments.

School districts recognize a need for regional organizations. Seventy-two districts said that they need regional organizations in order to get services, and another 53 said that the regional organizations they belong to are well-run. When asked if they would continue to purchase programs and services from education districts if a proposed law change gave revenues directly to school districts, 77% of the respondents (210 districts) said they would. School districts seem particularly concerned that they be able to obtain special education services from some regional organization, be it a cooperative or an education district.

School districts reiterated their interest in obtaining programs for small groups of students, particularly special education (61 districts) and gifted and talented students (53), as well as non-student based programs and services such as curriculum development (54), outcome based education (31), and staff development (50). School districts also expressed interest in using education district revenue for cooperative purchasing (16 districts), an activity often performed by ECSUs.

Some school districts suggested modifying the current system; others suggested completely restructuring it. The most common suggestions for modifying the current system of regional organizations include eliminating duplication of programs (24 districts), reducing the number of levels of administration (20), decreasing the number of mandates (13) or requiring the state to fully fund mandates (4). Reorganization suggestions include putting all regional organizations into one umbrella organization (33) and eliminating regional organizations, or giving school districts the revenues and letting them cooperate as needed (17). Five districts were concerned that creating one umbrella regional organization would be inefficient.

> ***"The greatest fear I have, because I've seen it happen before, is that the legislature will fold all cooperatives into one. This single cooperative will have a fuzzy mission that no one will understand or be happy with."***

School districts want a stable system of regional organizations. Nineteen districts expressed hope for stability, indicating that it was difficult for any system to work properly when it is subject to frequent changes and has an uncertain future. Another 13 said that the current system is not broken and asked that the legislature and MDE not fix it.

> ***"One must be careful not to tear down working structures and replace with larger structures not being able to meet common needs and expectations."***

> ***"We need a consistent stable vision or goal and a long term perspective. We have slapped on too many patches and changed horses too many times."***

School districts want regional organizations that provide direct service to be accessible. Thirty districts felt that organizations should be kept small, and twenty-four said that regional organizations should be geographically close to member school districts.

> ***"School districts need direct and indirect regional services. Direct service must be located closer to the districts than those providing indirect services. Education districts should provide direct services and could be clustered into a larger regional organization."***

School districts want to be included in the process of developing any new organizations or re-organization. School districts want a system in which they can feel ownership.

> ***"We have built our cooperative services with our neighbors. We have ownership!"***

Thirty-eight school districts held that organizations that grow from the "bottom-up" are superior to those imposed from the "top-down" and 31 asked that policymakers get local participation in any proposed changes. Fourteen districts said that services provided by all regional organizations should be determined by the needs of their member districts.

> ***"The education district is akin to neighbors working together rather than a bureaucracy implementing programs from some distant place."***

> ***"We look toward local neighbors to cooperate within educational programming and in an education district."***

> ***"We control efforts to help one another."***

Policy Implications

Throughout this report, we have seen school districts express both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with many current aspects of regional education organizations. At a time when "fixing" the regional delivery of educational services appears to be imperative, the school district concerns expressed in this report suggest some things to keep in mind.

A regional organization that provides direct services to students should be accessible. When students are being served by a regional organization, travel time becomes an issue and geographical accessiblity a concern. While interactive television can provide accessibility, often by providing academic programs in which relatively few students are interested (e.g. advanced mathematics, foreign languages), physical proximity is necessary in some cases. Some of the larger education districts have implemented or considered a cluster model of service delivery which provides multiple centers throughout the education district. These centers maximize accessibility and facilitate tailoring programs to individual district needs.

A regional organization should not offer programs and services available elsewhere. One source of great dissatisfaction for school districts is unnecessary program duplication. Districts can frequently get the same programs from an education district, a cooperative, and often from an ECSU. In a time when districts are counting every penny, many are frustrated by what they perceived as wasteful duplication of effort.

A regional organization should minimize administrative costs and structure. Districts want regional organizations to provide them with programs and services. The duplicative administrative structures that accompany multiple regional organizations are perceived as a waste of limited funds. Multiple administrative structures can also create an endless round of boards to sit on and meetings to attend.

A regional organization is a good forum to provide districts with programs required by few students and programs that do not involve students. Many regional organizations provide "low incidence" programs for students. This provides a very cost effective way for districts to provide programs for students with special needs. Regional organizations also provide programs that do not require student participation. Again and again districts told us that they make good use of regional organizations, particularly of education districts for curriculum and staff development and special education cooperatives for tracking special education mandates.

A regional organization should be "owned" by its member districts. Many districts are satisfied with their regional organization because they had been involved in establishing the organization, have representation on the board, and are involved in deciding which programs should be offered and how funds should be spent.

School districts resist having regional organizations fund programs and services that they do not need. School districts expressed dissatisfaction when the funding that they directed to regional organizations was used to fund programs they did not need or want. This was more frequently a source of dissatisfaction with education districts, some of which provide a wide range of programs to very different districts, than with cooperatives, which are often much more narrowly focused in the type of programs offered. Districts also resist subsidizing other members of a regional organization. Districts are well aware of the costs associated with membership in any regional organization. If the benefits of membership do not equal the benefits that districts could reap for the same price without membership, districts may have less desire to participate.

Reorganization should be approached cautiously. There are many aspects of cooperatives and education districts that work extremely well and that school districts are very happy with. Many of these organizations have a long history. Member districts have developed the trust and awareness necessary to ensure that cooperation yields optimal benefits. Districts do not want the legislature to "throw out the baby with the bathwater". Any reorganization plan should ensure that the aspects of regional organizations that have provided school districts with high quality, cost effective programs for many years are not lost in the transition.

Appendix A

Districts received surveys tailored to their regional organization membership: none, an education district only, one or more cooperatives only, or an education district and one or more cooperatives. The appendix contains the most extensive survey, the version that we sent to schools that belonged to an education district and one or more cooperatives. Questions used in the less extensive versions were drawn from this survey.

Research Department Minnesota House of Representatives
Survey on School District Participation in Cooperative Organizations

This survey is focused on school districts that belong to an education district and a cooperative or cooperatives. Please respond with information for the past school year (1990-91) unless otherwise indicated. We welcome any additional comments you would care to make.

School District Name _____ Number _____

Education District Name _____

Special Education Cooperative Name _____ # years as a member _____

Secondary Vocational Cooperative Name _____ # years as a member _____

Telecommunications Cooperative Name _____ # years as a member _____

Name, position and phone number of individual responding to this survey

_____

Section 1A: Reasons for Belonging to an Education District

1. Did the need for obtaining specific services/programs induce you to join the Education District?

_____ Yes
_____ No

1a. If **yes**, please list services/programs

_____

_____

1b. If **yes,** does your district receive those services/programs from the education district?

1c. If **no,** why did you join the Education District?

2. The 1991 Legislature changed the law regarding Education Districts so that beginning in 1994, eligible school districts will receive Education District revenue directly. All school districts that belonged to an Education District in 1993 will be eligible for this revenue. If this change is implemented as planned, will you use your education district revenue to: (check one)

_____ a) purchase the same types of programs/services from the Education District that you now receive

_____ b) obtain the same services from another source

_____ c) use the revenue for another purpose

3. a) List programs/services you would purchase from an Education District.

b) List programs/services you would purchase elsewhere and indicate where you would obtain them.

c) List other uses for revenue.

4. Are you satisfied with the current structure of your Education District?

_____ Yes
_____ No

If no, in what ways would you change it?

_____

_____

Section 1B: Reasons for Belonging to a Cooperative

Answer questions that relate to cooperatives in which you are currently a member.

5. Did the need for obtaining specific services/programs induce you to join a Cooperative?

Special Education Cooperative	**Secondary Vocational Cooperative**	**Telecommunications Cooperative**
___ Yes	___ Yes	___ Yes
___ No	___ No	___ No

5a. If **yes,** please list services/programs

Special Education Cooperative: _____

_____

Secondary Vocational Cooperative: _____

_____

Telecommunications Cooperative: _____

_____

5b. If **yes,** does the Cooperative provide those services/programs?

Special Education Cooperative	**Secondary Vocational Cooperative**	**Telecommunications Cooperative**
___ Yes	___ Yes	___ Yes
___ No	___ No	___ No

5c. If **no,** why did you join the Cooperative?

Special Education Cooperative: _____

_____

Secondary Vocational Cooperative: _____

_____

Telecommunications Cooperative: _____

_____

6. Are you satisfied with the current structure of your Cooperative(s)?

Special Education Cooperative	**Secondary Vocational Cooperative**	**Telecommunications Cooperative**
___ Yes	___ Yes	___ Yes
___ No	___ No	___ No

If no, in what ways would you change it?

Special Education Cooperative: _____

_____

Secondary Vocational Cooperative: _____

_____

Telecommunications Cooperative: _____

_____

Answer questions 7 and 8 if you belong to a secondary vocational cooperative.

7. The 1991 Legislature changed the law regarding cooperatives so that beginning in 1994, eligible school districts will receive secondary vocational cooperative revenue directly. All school districts that belonged to a secondary vocational cooperative in 1993 will be eligible for this revenue. If this change is implemented as planned, will you use your secondary vocational education revenue to: (check one)

_____ a) purchase the same types of programs/services from the secondary vocational cooperative that you now receive

_____ b) obtain the same services from a different source

_____ c) use the revenue for another purpose

8. a) List programs/services you would obtain from a secondary vocational cooperative.

_____

_____

b) List programs/services you would obtain elsewhere and indicate where you would obtain them.

_____

_____

c) List other uses for revenue.

_____

_____

Section 2: Education District Organization and Administration

9. Are you satisfied with the amount and type of influence your district has on Education District spending decisions?

_____ Yes
_____ No

Why/why not?

_____

_____

10. Does your district participate in Education District-based organizations, such as Advisory Committees, other than the Board? (please list)

_____

_____

_____

11. Each Education District was required to prepare a five-year plan detailing its budget and the programs and services it would provide to its member districts. Did your school district participate in developing the Education District's Five year plan?

_____ Yes
_____ No

12. Has or will your district participate in revising the plan?

_____ Yes
_____ No

13. Do you feel the plan adequately addresses your school district's needs?

_____ Yes
_____ No

Why/why not?

_____

_____

_____

Section 3A: Education District Programs

14. Does your district receive funding for curriculum development from the Education District?

_____ Yes
_____ No

15. Does curriculum development occur (check one):

_____ a) independently at your school district

_____ b) in conjunction with other school districts

_____ c) at the Education District level, without involving your school district

16. List the 5 most important programs/services that your district receives through the Education District.

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

d) _____

e) _____

17. Please complete the chart below. In the column titled "OTHER", include important programs/services not included in the other categories.

	Special Education	**Secondary Vocational**	**Instructional TV**	**Post-Secondary Courses**	**Other (Please list)**
Program operated out of your district in 1990-1991 in whole or in part (Yes or No)	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	_____ ____ Yes ____ No
Approximate number of students in your district who participate					
Do students have to leave school to obtain this program in your district? (Yes or No)	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No
Are education district funds used to support this program? (Yes or No)	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No
Are cooperative funds used to support this program? (Yes or No)	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No
Would you continue the program in your district if you directly received education district revenue? (Yes or No)	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No	____ Yes ____ No

Section 3B: Cooperative Programs

18. List the 5 most important programs/services that your district receives through the Cooperative.

a) _____

b) _____

c) _____

d) _____

e) _____

Section 4: Multiple Cooperative Membership

Answer the questions in this section if your district belonged to **more than one** of the following in school years 1989-1990 or 1990-1991:

- Education District
- Special Education Cooperative
- Secondary Vocational Cooperative
- Telecommunications Cooperative
- Cooperative Secondary Facilities

19. What are the advantages and disadvantages of multiple membership?

Advantages: _____

_____

_____

Disadvantages: _____

_____

_____

21. If your district has dropped out of a cooperative structure since 1989-1990, which ones did you drop out of? Why?

_____ a) Education District _____ # years you were a member

_____ b) Special Education Cooperative _____ # years you were a member

_____ c) Secondary Vocational Cooperative _____ # years you were a member

_____ d) Telecommunications Cooperative _____ # years you were a member

_____ e) Cooperative Secondary Facility _____ # years you were a member

f) Reasons for dropping out _____

_____

_____

Section 5. Other Comments

Please use this space for any additional comments/insights you have about the role of Education Districts and cooperatives, and how these organizations affect your school district.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____